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The  
"Maid of the Mill"

A STORY OF  
:: BALDOCK ::



An old romance re-told  
by  
W. B. GERISH

Vol. 10.  
Hertfordshire folk lore

**Price 1/-**

BISHOP'S STORTFORD  
1912



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140051/  
6/10/16



WATERLOW AND SONS LIMITED,  
PRINTERS,  
DUNSTABLE AND LONDON.



## “THE MAID OF THE MILL.”

### A STORY OF BALDOCK.

**T**HIS village beauty, immortalised in song, was an actual person, The mill, a picture of which was exhibited at a visit of the East Herts Archæological Society to Baldock in 1908, no longer exists. It was, however, visited as recently as 1857 by Edward Fitzgerald, the Suffolk poet, but shortly afterwards the mill, to which an inn was attached called “The Black Horse,” mine host being also the miller, was taken down and the licence either lapsed or was transferred to the existing inn “The Compasses.” The road which previously passed by the door had, early in the nineteenth century, been diverted by a cutting made through the hill, thus reducing the gradient and making it more direct. Some traces of the mill-stream are to be seen, much reduced in volume since the time when the jolly miller and his fair daughter were the subjects of one of the most popular ballads of the period.

The lines were written, it is stated, by the then curate of Baldock, who was presumably a young and impressionable man, with a taste for rustic beauty accompanied by a neat gift for verse. What the Rector and the staid folk of the ancient town thought of his performance we do not know, but we are told that the very numerous visitors, whom the popular ballad, sung all over the country, brought to Baldock and to the mill, whilst ensuring an increase of custom to the house, caused both father and daughter no little annoyance. The maiden appears to have been as modest as she was fair and decidedly disapproved of the freedom displayed by the beaux of the period and, in the end, was not to be seen by visitors. This we learn from the Rev. Percival Stockdale (1736–1811) a very curious cleric who, after many wanderings and a close acquaintance with the seamy side of life, in the army, at sea, and lastly as a booksellers’ hack, writing upon any subject under the sun for a ‘pittance, was finally presented by Lord Thurlow with two livings in Northumberland which he entirely neglected to serve until some two years before his death, when, broken in health and estate, he at last undertook the “cure of souls” in the parishes to which he had been appointed twelve years earlier. In his “Autobiography,”

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published in 1809, he refers to an elegant interlude in his life. I cannot, perhaps, do better than quote this in full :—

"Baldock is a market town about eight miles south of Biggleswade ; it is on the high north road and in the way to Stevenage. A miller lived on the skirts of Baldock ; he kept a little publick-house, himself and his usual abode had been rendered famous by verse and beauty. He had a charming daughter, though at my time she had arrived at 'womanhood where youth ended.' Her attractions had been celebrated by the curate of the place, who had written a song in her praise, which was marked with vivacity and taste, and indeed with a degree of genius. It had its very popular and flourishing day, and I remember when it was constantly sung in London, and all over the Kingdom. I think that I remember it, and I shall give it to the reader when I have told my story. I had frequently expressed to Haywood (he was a young friend from Biggleswade, who, one day, when 'in his cups' collared and almost strangled Mr. Phillips, a worthy attorney of Hitchin) my great desire to see this rustick Diana ; but he assured me that it was impracticable, for her family had been so long teized with the same curiosity, and were so disgusted with the rudeness which the girl had suffered from some people, that they had determined never to expose her to the risk of such indignities. I told Haywood that I was resolved to see her, and that I thought it would be very possible to see her, as I should manage my introduction. He was eager to lay me a wager on the subject, I took him at his proposal, and our bett was a dozen of the best port (to be payed by *me* if I saw her not, and by *him* if I saw her), and to be drank with some of our select friends at honest Jerry Bryant's, my host of 'The Garter.' On our road to Stevenage we stopped at the mill, and went into the house. The house seemed inauspicious, for several people sate there drinking, and they were rather obstreperous. Haywood smiled and predicted the defeat of our scheme, but I told him I was sure that it would take effect on our return in the evening. I felt a tremulous kind of anxiety for the event. I always revered virtuous beauty, however low the class of life was which it adorned, and I thought that I would acquit myself better, that I would achieve my exploit with more spirit and decision under the benign and generous, not under the violent and



maddening auspices of Bacchus. We rode to Stevenage; dined merrily there; I drank but a pint of wine, for an enterprise of ‘great pith and moment’ was to be executed. A moderate glass animates us to *any* heroick deed, excess unfits us for it. We lighted once more at the honest miller’s, on a delightful vernal evening; it was worthy of the object of my generalship. I was alarmed at seeing again several people who were drinking in the house, but wine and honour were at stake and no time was to be lost. I desired to speak privately with the father of this daughter of Ceres; he very civilly accompanied me into a little field which was behind his house; the adjacent trees and the beautiful grounds of Hertfordshire seemed to consecrate the scene and *my* wishes; and we ‘spoke almost in whispers lest a Greek should hear.’ I told him that I would take it as a great favour if he would permit me to see his fair daughter for a few minutes. I highly commended his truly paternal resolution not to expose her to ill-manners after the very improper treatment that she had experienced. I mentioned the wager that was to be decided between me and the gentleman who was with me, and I gave him my word and honour that if he would indulge me with a short interview with his daughter I would treat her with all possible civility and respect. The man looked steadfastly at me for awhile and at length gave me a favourable answer. He said, that to oblige me, he would break his resolution for he was certain that I would behave like a gentleman. He showed Mr. Haywood and me into a parlour, and as a proof of his confidence in me, he retired. In a minute or two the goddess of the grove entered, in attire of elegant though of Arcadian simplicity, and ‘blushing like the morn.’ She was not young, perhaps above thirty, but yet lively, fair and blooming. The vivacity of her appearance was tempered with that reserve, which was her proper and respectable guard in the company of strangers. There was great gentility and symmetry in her person; her features were fine and expressive; her eyes were black and of piercing eloquence. There was a natural ease, politeness and grace in her manner, which, were they originally wanting, can never be equalled by all the elaborate ingenuity of art. In our short conversation her language was proper and pertinent; she permitted me respectfully to salute her. I assured her of the high sense which I had of the obligation that she had conferred on me. Haywood was

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rather too ardent in his advances ; I checked his indiscretion peremptorily and severely. We bade adieu to the fair one, and I returned victorious to Biggleswade. A libation of the dozen of port was soon made at ‘The Swan’ in a society, who were worthy of the sacred and social rite, to the ‘Lass of the Mill.’”

The year in which this adventure took place was 1756, and the maiden was then, as we learn, about thirty. Shortly afterwards she married Henry Leonard, and some twelve years later was borne to her last resting-place beneath the elms in Baldock churchyard, where, up to recently, was a stone inscribed :—

IN MEMORY OF  
MARY LEONARD,  
WIFE OF HENRY LEONARD,  
WHO DIED APRIL 26, 1769,  
AGED 43 YEARS.

Although this has strangely disappeared that to her husband, Henry Leonard, who died April 28, 1802, aged 78, and his second wife, Sarah, who died February 22, 1801, aged 75, are still to be seen.

In the Baldock Burial Register, under date 1769, we find :—  
“Leonard, Mary, wife of Henry, aff<sup>t</sup>., bur. April 30,” and a footnote by the Revd. John Simpson, rector of Baldock in 1862, states : “This was the celebrated lass of Baldock Mill.”

The ballad apparently consisted of only four verses—at least, that is all Mr. Stockdale gives :—

Who has e’er been at Baldock, must needs know the mill,  
With the sign of The Horse, at the foot of the hill ;  
Where the grave, and the gay, the clown and the beau,  
Without all distinction promiscuously go.

This man of the Mill has a daughter so fair,  
Of so pleasing a shape, and so winning an air ;  
That once on the evergreen bank as she stood,  
I could swear’t had been Venus, just sprang from the flood.

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But looking again I perceived my mistake,  
For Venus though fair has the looks of a rake ;  
Where nothing but virtue and modesty fill,  
The more beautiful looks of the "Lass of the Mill."

Prometheus stole fire, as the poets all say,  
To enliven the mass he had moulded of clay ;  
But had Polly been near him, the beams of her eyes,  
Would have saved him the trouble of robbing the skies.

There are two prints of old Baldock of considerable rarity. The first represents a general view of the town taken from a field on the west. There are many old houses and the church tower with its tall spire is a conspicuous object. The figure on horseback is said to be Mr. FitzJohn the maltster (the FitzJohns were an ancient Baldock family now alas ! only represented by a line of memorials occupying nearly three-quarters of the length of the central aisle of the nave) who is looking at the men and women engaged in haymaking. The central figure among the maidens is supposed to represent the miller's daughter who, with her companions, is most tastefully attired. The picture was drawn on October 20, 1786, by Master Chapman, the figures by R. Pollard, and it was engraved by F. Jukes and published by him on May 1, 1787. At the time the drawing was made the maid had been dead some seventeen years so the portrait must be imaginary. The second print shows two sides of a quaint and picturesque building, probably of seventeenth-century date. One side, shown white in the engraving, is apparently of lath and plaster, and has, near the gable-apex, the sign of a horse. Underneath is a window divided into four lights by vertical mullions and beneath this a window of two lights ; both of these have diamond-shape panes. On the left is the door, where stands the landlord portly and jolly, with a little maid by his side. The upper portion of the remainder of the building visible in the print consists of pargetting, or plaster work. There is one window in the gable and two dormer windows are shown. On the ground floor are two windows and a door ; the lower part of this side is of brick. To the right is a gate and pound with horses laden with sacks of flour. Ladies and gentlemen adorn the foreground, the former wearing high-waisted

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dresses and large hats decked with feathers, while the latter are in knee-breeches, fancy waistcoats and long coats. They all assume artificial attitudes much as we see them in the fashion-plates of the present day and which would be described as elegant.

I have made numerous enquiries respecting the existence of any authentic portrait, either in the shape of a painting or engraving of the “Maid of the Mill” but so far without success. I am not altogether without hope that one does exist and perhaps when this appears in print it may be the means of revealing the whereabouts of a copy.

A small pamphlet, purporting to be an account of the Maid and her suitors, is occasionally met with. It is of some rarity, a copy reported in a recent bookseller’s list is priced 30 —, practically its weight in gold. My friend, Mr. H. R. Wilton Hall, librarian of the Museum at St. Albans, has very kindly made a synopsis of the story which, although fictitious, is of local interest.

The title page reads :—

THE  
MAID OF THE MILL,  
OR, THE  
COTTAGE BEAUTY,  
Being the Real and Entertaining History of  
SQUIRE RICHLAND,  
and  
LUCY ARNOLD,  
the Miller’s Daughter of the county of  
Hertfordshire.

containing :

- I. An account of the Maid of the Mill.
- II. Her various sweethearts and the manner they take to gain her affections.
- III. Squire Richland falls in love with her and what follows.
- IV. The way she takes to get rid of her former lovers.  
Letters between her and the squire.
- V. Account of Miss Richland and her affairs in love ; more letters between the Maid of the Mill and Squire Richland ; he comes to her father’s ; promises marriage.











